



## Poland's priests are losing faith about EU membership

by Zsófia Szilágyi

Poland's clergy are deeply divided over the Catholic Church's role in domestic politics and more pessimistic about European integration than the society-at-large –reveals a January 2003 in-depth study entitled "Parish Clergy on Integration with the European Union."

Conducted by the Polish Institute of Public Affairs (ISP), the 82-page survey draws up a comprehensive profile regarding the country's Catholic clerics, investigates their views on European Union (EU) membership, and analyses the Church's perceived responsibility in political life. The study received extensive coverage in the Polish media prior to the June referendum, in which 77,4% of Poles voted in favour of EU membership.

### The pros and cons of EU membership

Based on a representative sample of 300 parish priests and 300 vicars, the survey suggests that Poland's clergy have significantly reassessed the consequences of EU membership since the first, similar survey. While in 1998, 84% of the Church community supported membership (much higher than the average population), in 2003 only 59% express support, while 20% are against and 21% are undecided. By contrast, societal support for membership grew to 68% by 2003, one of the highest in the block of candidate countries.

The clergy's increasing pessimism is surprising in view of the fact that Pope John Paul II. has expressed evident support for Poland's membership, stressing that it should be perceived as a civilisational choice. Speaking to a crowd of some 20,000 Poles in Rome prior to the referendum, he labelled the historic opportunity a journey "From the Union of Lublin (which united Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 16th Century) to the European Union."

However, the clergy are concerned about specific, potentially disparaging effects of membership. They are especially worried that inclusion in the EU will have a negative influence on the institution of the Polish family, on religion, customs and morals. A particular concern has developed regarding the future legislation of abortion, euthanasia, and same-sex marriages. 65% of priests anticipate that homosexual relationships will be given legal status following accession.

Similarly to most Poles, a large majority of priests think that the EU-Poland partnership has been asymmetric, for the benefit of the EU, and Poland will continue to stay a second class partner even after 2004. The clergy increasingly see the European Union as a club that is driven by the interests of the strongest economies, and linked more by "common interests", as opposed to "common values".

Survey data regarding the priests' educational background and interests reveals a group of informed thinkers. The study shows that all priests have higher education degrees, are well-travelled and have considerably better foreign language skills than the average Pole. Polish priests are also significantly more interested in political developments (32% register a "high" interest) than the average citizen (14%). Over half of the clergy are also regular internet users.

Despite the growing anxiety about membership, the priests view EU membership as a strategic choice for Poland – more favoured than scenarios such as staying neutral, or fostering a closer relationship either with the US, or with Russia. Most of the priests also believe that the EU creates adequate conditions for the develop-

ment of national cultures. Over two-thirds of the respondents say that integration does not pose a threat to the sovereignty and identity of Poles.

They are also optimistic that membership will bring about an improvement in international security, law and order, and will contribute to the development of democracy and civil liberties. A solid majority (62%) believe that integration will have a positive effect on the Polish economy, and that European financial assistance will be instrumental in the country's further development. The Church community also feels certain about their own position in society, and does not anticipate major changes in Church influence.

The survey indicates that the Polish Church's expectations regarding Poland's future are higher than that of the average Pole. Most clerics admit to a good financial situation (73%), and believe that the Polish living standards will improve over the next five years (36%) – which is notably higher than the number of optimists in society (15%), or among university graduates (18%).

### **A divided Church**

Historically, the Catholic Church has played a key role in Polish politics and society. It was a leading anti-Communist force, and since 1989 it has created an avoidable political presence. Among others, it has been the primary force behind the concordat with the Vatican, as well as the 1993 ban on abortion. Today, the Church gives moral support and political guidance to voters who oppose unpopular economic and social reforms, and is expected to maintain a strong influence on societal attitudes toward the EU following the May 2004 accession.

The IPS survey suggests that the clerics were deeply divided over the issue of direct political involvement prior to the June referendum, with 45% of the respondents saying the Church should assume a larger political role, and 47% insisting it should not. At the same time, there were several indications that the Church is already far too involved – the majority of priests (77%) admitted to wanting to see more practicing Catholics in government positions. Before the vote, 59% thought that the Church should go public with its official position on the EU, and thereby persuade the country's churchgoers – an estimated 50% of the population – to vote "yes".

However, the Church's official support for EU membership had been undermined by its criticism of the EU, and its denouncement of the negotiation strategy of the left-wing government, led by Leszek Miller. In January, the Church directly intervened in the government's negotiations with Brussels when Cardinal Jozef Glemp, the head of the Polish Church, called for a special clause in the EU membership treaty recognising the "separateness" of Poland's position on abortion. Church leaders also demanded that wording be added to guarantee the country's anti-abortion laws against future interference from Brussels.

Poland's restrictive abortion law allows termination of pregnancy only in incidents of rape and incest, when the woman's health or life is threatened, or when the fetus is damaged. Although the EU treaty does not include specifics relating to abortion, the Church worried that a 2002 European Parliament resolution, urging all member states to legalise abortion, would be a catalyst for "unwelcome" change in Poland. The government eventually caved in to pressure and negotiated an Annex, stating that no future EU legislation "shall disturb the right of the Republic of Poland to regulate on issues of moral importance and concerning the protection of human life."

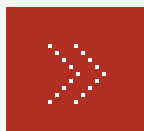
The Church's political focus has been also highlighted by the Church leadership's active involvement in the European Constitution debate. Leading Church officials insisted on including a reference to Europe's Christian roots in the text of the future constitution, and would like to see the insertion of the concept of "religious freedom" as well as an "Invocatio Dei" (reference to God).

At the same time, the politicisation trend is also underlined by the typology of concerns voiced by the clerics. It seems that the Church community is more concerned about issues of social and political importance than traditional religious matters. The study lists unemployment, crime and government corruption as the most important issues considered by the clergy to be plaguing Polish society. Diminishing spirituality, departure from God, and the fight against disease are only secondary concerns.

In contrast to the clerics' preference to push for a "yes" vote in the referendum, Church leaders decided not to give an explicit support to the pro-EU cause. But despite the effort to stay neutral, they were embarrassed by the radical Catholic station, Radio Maryja, which engaged in an aggressive anti-European campaign. The Church appealed to the clergy and believers to tune into the Church's official station, Radio Jozef, and issued several requests to the station to abandon its propaganda, but its editors declined to do so.

Even prior to the referendum, the Church had had a difficult relationship with the fundamentalist station, whose anti-Semitic and anti-Western crusade was making international headlines. Funded primarily by Polish communities abroad, it claims to be the most influential Catholic media outlet in Poland. In October 2002, Cardinal Glemp issued a decree banning the station's operation and fundraising activities at parishes in the Warsaw Archdiocese.

The study shows that Radio Maryja is not considered representative of the whole clergy – only one third of priests believe that its political views accurately reflect the Catholic view. Despite that, almost half of all priests are regular listeners. The survey reveals that the clergy are very aware of the existing differences of opinion on key matters within the Church, and 60% believe that they should strive to attain a common position wherever possible.



Article referred to

Institute for Public Affairs, 'The Polish catholic clergy and the European integration', 1998  
<http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00001223/>